C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 005793

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/05/2016
TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL OSCE TU
SUBJECT: 183 NON-MUSLIM LEADERS ISSUE STATEMENT PROTESTING
GOVERNMENT'S TREATMENT OF MINORITIES

REF: A. ANK 2750

¶B. IST 1711

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner; reasons 1.4(b),(d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On September 25, 183 non-Muslim minority
Turkish citizens, including many intellectuals and writers,
issued a first-ever joint statement protesting the
government's treatment of minorities. The statement came in
the wake of contentious parliamentary committee debate over
EU harmonization legislation designed to expand the rights of
non-Muslim minorities. During the debate, the ruling Justice
and Development Party (AKP) and main opposition Republican
People's Party (CHP) positioned themselves to avoid offending
nationalist-minded voters, and minority groups felt ignored.
Their statement reflects continued frustration over what they
see as government talk of reform with less than meaningful
action. End summary.

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Parties Clash Over Laws Expanding Minority Rights
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¶2. (U) During the week of September 18, parliamentary
committees debated two sensitive laws that are part of the
so-called 9th Reform Package: The Foundations Law and the
Private Education Institutions Law (the "Education Law").
The Foundations Law would give minorities (generally defined
as Greeks, Armenians, and Jews, per the Lausanne Treaty)
increased control over their affairs and property, and
facilitate the return of foundation properties previously
seized by the government (see ref A). The Education Law
seeks to clarify the definitions of private, minority, and
foreign schools. It also contains an amendment that, if
passed, would allow non-citizens who reside in Turkey to send
their children to minority schools.

¶3. (U) During committee debate on both bills, CHP members
argued that both laws violated the "reciprocity" principle of
the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne by creating rights for
non-Muslims in Turkey without requiring the Government of
Greece to enact similar, reciprocal reforms with respect to
its Muslim minority. The CHP stated that it was particularly
alarmed that the amendment to the Education Law would set the
"dangerous" precedent of allowing the Greek Orthodox Halki
Seminary to be reopened. Such a hard-line stance is in
lock-step with CHP's continuous efforts to attract the

nationalist vote by tripping up AKP's EU-related reform efforts (see ref B).

¶4. (U) The AKP, in response, tried to bolster its own nationalist bona fides. PM Erdogan stated that the provisions were required by the EU, and that the government would not begin implementation until the Greek government acted in a reciprocal nature by allowing the building of a mosque in Athens and allowing western Thrace Turks to elect their own muftis. Ultimately, the AKP removed the controversial -- but potentially significant -- amendment to the Education Law, and parliament passed a mostly procedural bill that did little to expand minority rights. The Foundations Law emerged from committee on October 3.

Minorities Ask To Be Treated As Full Citizens

¶5. (U) During these debates, several minority communities expressed to the press their belief that the GOT's efforts constituted a disingenuous attempt to appease the EU, rather than a genuine effort to improve the situation of minorities. Viewing themselves as pawns being used by political parties to further their respective political agendas, 183 representatives from these communities for the first time in history signed and released a joint statement of protest, the translated text of which follows:

-Begin text: We deplore both the governing party -- which ignored until now our requests about our citizenship rights and problems but without any restraint admitted that it was taking these up out of necessity because of the EU admission issue -- and similarly the opposition -- which did not

ANKARA 00005793 002 OF 002

contribute at all to the resolution of our problems. During the debates on some laws that we doubt will bring solutions to our problems, we would like to remind those who demand "reciprocity and admit at the parliament that we were regarded as hostages, that what they are imagining is not a democratic Republican order. Those of us who are the non-Muslim citizens of the Republic of Turkey and whose signatures can be found below, invite the government and the opposition to absorb the democratic Republic and act accordingly. End text.

¶6. (C) Comment: The first-ever joint public statement reflects the discontent and continuing frustration felt by Turkey's minority communities over the pace of reforms since the EU negotiation process began last year. They see the recently-passed Education Law as ineffectual and the GOT's failure to date to pass a new Foundations Law as an example of the government's unwillingness to grant additional minority rights, despite its contrary claims to the EU. This highlights that the importance of the nationalist vote in the 2007 elections will make it difficult politically for the AKP to push through significant reforms called for by minority communities, such as returning confiscated foundation property, reopening Halki Seminary, or allowing non-citizens to attend minority schools. The AKP has sufficient votes in parliament but -- absent a let-up in nationalist appeal -- may lack the political will for the fight, even if their commitment to the EU accession process is called into question. End comment.

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